

*Summary: It's Seven's birthday, and gifts abound, including a very special offer... from the captain.*

# BIRTHDAY ON DECK

*by Lara Zielinsky*

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## Part One

*"Regeneration cycle complete."* The computer's even, feminine voice, greeted Seven as she opened her eyes, as it did every cycle's end, here in Cargo Bay 2, aboard the *USS Voyager*, a Federation starship lost in the Delta quadrant for more than seven years.

Seven stepped away from the power grid of her alcove, taking in her surroundings with a single, complete glance. The clang of entry doors stopped her sweep.

*Someone was here?* Seven stared at the doors, wondering who it could have been. Then immediately scanned to see what might have been disturbed or removed.

Cargo bay two might be where she was quartered because of the necessary and bulky alcoves, but it was also one of only two large holding areas for *Voyager's* supplies. Her morning visitor likely had been Neelix, the ship's Talaxian. There was one less container of comestibles than there had been the evening before. She had conducted an inventory as a matter of course before regenerating.

With the question settled to her satisfaction, Seven turned to her work console to open her personal log, as the Doctor had directed her was customary. Her console's decoration drew her up short.

A trio of long-stem flora lay wrapped in verdant tissue paper. Tilting her head for a closer examination, Seven reached out to caress the soft edge of a crimson rose. Her stomach fluttered at the soft, velvet feel of the petals. Trailing her fingertips over the roses' bed of wide, velvet soft fern leaves she marveled at the simple natural beauty, more accustomed to the sleek silver of technology. She was undeniably moved emotionally by the gesture however as she wiped away moisture from her eyes.

"Someone was here." She unconsciously smiled with child-like joy. Lifting the roses, she was drawn over and over again to stroke the petals and grew more curious as to their sender. There was no note among the stems, nor was one caught in the tie holding the tissue around them. Briefly she scanned the nearby deck plating, seeing nothing which might have fallen from the console.

An anonymous gift baffled Seven. First, she had never before received a gift of any kind. Secondly, as a former Borg anonymity was anathema to her. In the Collective mind no action could be secret from others.

From the Doctor's lessons, Seven knew that roses suggested romantic feelings. Someone was offering her a gesture of intimate affection. Her chest tightened with fear.

After a failed scenario on the holodeck, Seven had abandoned the pursuit of exploring her emotional connections with the crew. That someone would be pursuing her now greatly disturbed her. In fact, her very existence could be endangered.

Seven skipped over checking her console, or recording a personal log, and reported instead

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directly to Astrometrics, hoping for orderliness to return to her day with the familiar tasks of trajectory calculations and sensor readout analysis.

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Seven entered the Astrometrics lab exactly three minutes later.

"Good morning, Seven." Icheb turned at his customary post. Also a former member of the Borg, Icheb's appearance calmed Seven further.

The PADD containing his shift report slipped from his right hand to her left in their peculiar "handshake." "Your shift passed without incident?" she inquired.

"Yes." He turned to leave.

"Where are you going now?" Seven frowned. Normally he spent anywhere from 2.4 to 5 minutes explaining his day's plans.

"I am working with Mr. Neelix and Naomi on a project. I must go, or I will be late."

"Of course." Seven paused then offered, "Have a good day."

"You too, Seven." He smiled widely at her then rushed quickly out, leaving Seven to the solitude and the console readouts.

Comparing Icheb's last readings from his PADD to the current readings on her console, Seven moved down and around the horseshoe until she reached the oscillator. A box approximately 10 centimeters square in red shiny wrapping paper rested starkly obvious against the utilitarian gray of the metal casing. A stiff card attached to the near corner proclaimed in small lettering "To Seven."

She turned over the card and read "Happy Birthday." The roses now made more sense. "Computer, reference personal record, Annika Hansen. State birthdate."

"*Annika Hansen, only child of Erin and Magnus Hansen -*" Seven swallowed as she heard the names of the people who had been her parents for far too short a time. "*--was born February 22, 2377.*"

She looked at the present again. *It was Annika's...?* She swallowed as the sensation of awe connected her with that child she had been so long ago. "It's my birthday."

Seven was still immersing herself in the ideas of growing older, being younger, and wanting to share the sensations of the experience with Captain Janeway, when, speak of the devil herself, Captain Kathryn Janeway stepped through the entry to Astrometrics. Auburn hair shined in the backlight from the corridor before the doors closed with a decided *thunk*.

Janeway began the ritual of greeting. "Good morning, Seven."

The young woman noted a faint smile on the older woman's lips and returned it with one of her own. Janeway paused. The woman leaned against the console as their gazes lingered. Seven's stomach churned when the captain finally dropped her eyes, rubbing a light hand over her cheek.

When the captain said nothing more, her gaze moving over the readouts, Seven prompted, "Was there something you wanted, Captain?"

The smile left the captain's face. Following her line of sight, Seven realized that the captain had noticed the package resting on the console. But the captain's question chose another topic. "Have you completed the overnight report?"

"I have not." Before Janeway could show disappointment - a particular expression Seven was always deeply bothered to cause - Seven immediately amended, "It will be ready ahead of the morning meeting."

"A bit distracted this morning?" Janeway returned her gaze to the present, finally stepping forward and lightly touching the present. "What a lovely wrapping," she said softly. "Is it from anyone in particular?"

Seven shook her head. "I do not know. Neither it, nor the roses this morning had any sort of note."

"They...You received roses?" Janeway's fingers stilled on the navy blue bow. "From whom?"

"I do not know." The captain sounded curious, but also Seven thought she detected a note of dismay, perhaps disapproval. "Are you disappointed in me, Captain?"

"I did think you had given up dating."

"I am not dating."

Janeway leaned against the console, her hands bracing her as she looked up, meeting Seven's eyes. "If you need to talk, I can listen."

*Her eyes are the blue of a class 4 nebula,* Seven thought. It was the only thing she could think, as the seconds stretched into a full minute of silence between them. But she could not break their linked gazes. She found herself swaying. To steady her balance she took a half step forward, toward the captain. "Captain, I..." She did not know what she wanted to say, but she could feel the impulse in her body raising her right hand to reach out for the captain's shoulder.

"Seven?" *Why was she suddenly noting the captain's scent?* Sweetly pungent it seemed to be a mix of the roses from the morning and a very feminine musk. Her vision swam slightly.

With effort Seven cleared her throat. "I should complete my report."

With a slight pursing of her lips, Janeway took a half-step away and slowly nodded. "You're right. I'll see you at the meeting."

"Yes, Captain."

"And Seven," Janeway paused in the open doorway. "Happy Birthday."

Her vision was definitely swimming now, Seven thought, as she saw Janeway, hips appearing to sway, exiting Astrometrics.

Janeway returned to the bridge, greeted by her officers. As she settled into her chair, she requested a status report from Tom Paris the ship's helmsman. A glance to her rear stations brought Harry Kim into view.

*Had the earnest man finally gotten up the nerve to pursue Seven of Nine?* Unsigned roses might be just up his alley. Dropping her gaze she caught an inquiringly lifted brow from Chakotay.

"Something on your mind, Captain?" he asked.

"Just contemplating the day ahead," she answered. *Or was it Chakotay?* She had found Seven's program after all. Maybe he had too.

"I'll be in my ready room, going over the latest Alpha quadrant reports," she said suddenly.

Inside the private sanctuary, she paced, weighing her thoughts. Finally she called up a coffee from the replicator and settled at her desk. Her foot contacted an obstacle and she reached down, lifting up a small thin box, wrapped in a softly banded silver and blue pattern paper. She swallowed.

*Maybe the staff meeting wasn't the best place for this gift,* she thought. *Not if Harry or Chakotay would think...*

*What?* Her inner voice prodded her. *Would think what, Kathryn? That you're giving a present for a birthday?*

*But they gave theirs privately, anonymously.*

*Then it's high time their captain show them how courting is really done.*

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Kathryn froze.

*Courting? Am I courting her?*

*It's just a picture.*

*But you got the idea from Seven herself.*

After Seven had spent 49 hours in six days working in the holodeck on what she euphemistically termed 'research', Janeway was bothered when she felt instinctively that Seven had lied about the nature of that research. So she had investigated the holodeck logs on her own last scheduled holodeck excursion. Instead of calling up her own Da Vinci program, she had asked the computer - captain's privilege a marvelous thing - to bring up Seven's program.

*Instead of a stark lab with a prototype gravimetric array in testing, Kathryn stood in warmly lit quarters, beside a piano lit by candlelight.*

*Stepping away from the instrument, Janeway took in more of the surprisingly intimate space. Seven's quarters she guessed, pleased surprise and instinct rising as she took in the stellar phenomenon art work adorning a wall. It was then, turning from that swirling sight, that Janeway spied the bed. Restlessly she tore her gaze from the silken sheets, too easily imagining Seven's face in repose on the pillow. Above the bed on the wall was a small dreamcatcher - recognizable since she had one tucked in the closet, a gift from Chakotay after her desperate isolation in The Void.*

*On the small nightstand by the bed sat a single solitary holo-photograph. Janeway recognized Magnus and Erin Hansen and the young Annika, a vision that had never left Kathryn in all the years since her first discovery of the human identity of the angry newly-severed Borg gracing her brig.*

Kathryn came back to the present, awash in emotions from every moment of every day she had spent thinking of or being in Seven's presence aboard the ship. The memories filled up every empty part of her, warming cold lonely recesses, softening the sharp edges of her constant pain.

Her gaze returned once again to the tenderly wrapped gift. She wondered if Seven would know from where it came, because it was, indeed, a reproduction of that holographic detail. It was meant to adorn the nightstand Janeway had placed herself in the refurbished quarters she intended to assign to Seven of Nine, on Deck 2, on the far side of the VIP quarters next to Janeway's own.

Since B'Elanna had preferred to keep her quarters on Deck 9 close to Engineering and Tom had joined her there when they married, the "chief engineer's" quarters remained, like the VIP quarters, perpetually empty.

Janeway had great hopes for a Seven of Nine drawn out from the seclusion of her cargo bay more centrally to the ship's life.

Truthfully: to the ship's captain's life.

Kathryn Janeway had discovered something profound about herself when she uncovered the true nature of Seven's holodeck program. Despite her words to the contrary Seven did want romance, a partner. From what she had seen, Seven wanted even more: a *lover*. Kathryn wondered how the young woman had hit upon the idea then remembered her own embarrassing episode in the holodeck, desperate loneliness sending her to seek out Michael's company. *Had Seven seen that, and surmised that was the appropriate way to have a relationship?*

It was then, as Janeway hurt for Seven, that she realized how much *she* wanted to be the one to show Seven what love really could be because she knew now what it really was herself.

The truth was so plain now she almost laughed aloud. All the arguments, all the confrontations, all the mutual searches for understanding. Her touches. The way Seven's late night

visits for philosophical discussion trailing off coincided with Janeway's deepening depression. The way Janeway found herself slipping down to the Cargo Bay when she knew Seven would be regenerating. She never managed to deactivate the cycle or bring the questions swirling in her mind to her lips, but just stood watching the young woman and wondering.

All the while she had been searching for the answers to what was on Seven's mind she had been also searching for answers in her own. Now she knew. She was in love with Seven of Nine.

Now, all she wanted to know was two things:

*Who had sent the flowers and the gift Seven had already encountered?*

*And...*

*Could she have a chance too?*

## **Part Two**

"All senior officers report to the conference room."

The captain's call came over the combadges of Lt. B'Elanna Torres, *Voyager's* Chief Engineer, and Seven of Nine, Astrometrics officer, echoing where they were crouched inside a Jeffries tube making repairs in Main Engineering.

The very pregnant Torres lost her balance in surprise at the interruption. Only Seven's quick reflexes catching the woman under her back and shoulders prevented a very jarring crash to the deck.

After they struggled together to get her to her feet, B'Elanna huffed an anxious, "Thanks, Seven."

"Are you damaged?" Seven asked as B'Elanna rubbed her lower back and grimaced.

"No. I'll be fine." She rubbed a moment longer then dropped her hands. She reminded, "The captain awaits."

B'Elanna could not be certain of course - Seven's behavior baffled her at the best of times - but she was almost positive that Seven checked her hair with a timid hand as they strode for the exit. The taller woman's lengthy strides carried her out a step ahead.

Only a few weeks earlier in the same visit where Seven gave B'Elanna a belated baby shower gift, the young woman had asked about B'Elanna's technique for arranging her own hair. Before she had gotten over that surprise B'Elanna had rattled off something flip about a sonic shower and engine grease. Just as abruptly as the question had been posed, once the answer was given, Seven had left. Harry, who had been coming in at that moment, wondered aloud if there was an alien intruder aboard.

Though she had amusedly related the incident then and thought nothing of it, B'Elanna now began to wonder if she had been a little snarky. Seven was obviously out to impress someone at the senior officers meeting.

*Not Harry*, she inwardly chuckled as the former drone brushed past him without an assessing glance when she and B'Elanna entered the conference room from the turbolift moments later.

*The Doctor?* Seven did dip her head, acknowledging the holographic Chief Medical Officer as he held her chair. *Nah*.

B'Elanna settled to Chakotay's right, next to Tom Paris, her husband, and the ship's primary navigational specialist. Seven's assessing glance around the table skimmed over them all. Moving her gaze beyond the captain's empty chair Seven's eyes lingered on Tuvok for a long moment, and

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then she straightened quickly in her own chair. B'Elanna pondered the emulation, then considered the Vulcan security chief was married and dismissed it.

The doors from the bridge opened, admitting the captain. All eyes turned. Each person was touched in turn by a smiling and warm blue-gray gaze. A questioning auburn brow lifted toward B'Elanna and she flushed as she nodded and lightly rubbed her protruding stomach. *The baby's fine.*

For just a moment Kathryn Janeway emerged from behind the captain's duty. "How are you doing, B'Elanna?"

Everyone asked about the baby, so the question made Torres blink. "I... I'm fine." She hesitated then added, "Thank you, Captain."

"Lt. Torres fell earlier in Engineering," Seven supplied suddenly.

Torres tossed invisible daggers - lovely, lethal serrated edges gleaming - at Seven as she saw Janeway turn a worried gaze to Seven. Then she returned her captain's eye back on B'Elanna. "It wasn't anything," she replied defensively.

"B'Elanna?" Tom queried.

The half-Klingon woman groaned. "I fell on my butt when I was startled by the comm-link. I was already crouched on the floor. It just upset me."

Everyone winced hearing B'Elanna's defensive tone. It filled her voice with growling rumbles.

Chastened, Tom offered, "Okay."

"Well," Janeway said looking back across the table at Seven. "Maybe we'll get a better reaction for the first of my notes. Ship's records indicate today is the anniversary of a very special event." Neelix smiled so broadly that B'Elanna wondered what he knew - and what sort of party it would require her attending.

The captain did not keep her information private beyond a breath. "Today, by the Earth calendar reckoning, it is Seven's birthday." The captain's faint smile lifted slightly, pulling a dimple in one cheek as she looked benevolently upon Seven.

*Really?* B'Elanna watched the effect of the public sharing of this knowledge on Seven's features. Porcelain cheeks stained slowly pink as the Borg winced, but held the captain's gaze, not daring to look left or right at the open-mouthed smiles of her other crewmates. Neelix's sharp thump on Seven's shoulder and "heartly congratulations" was almost rewarded with a strong backhand. But B'Elanna watched the hand flex carefully and the muscles relax.

Seven took The Doctor's, "Best wishes, Seven" with a dip of her chin, but, as though seeking assurances, her gaze returned to the captain.

Neelix patted the slim shoulders once more, more gently, and returned fully to his seat. Seven swallowed then struggled to find words to speak. "Captain...everyone. I...thank you."

"Naomi has been planning the party all week. You'll come won't you?" Neelix asked.

B'Elanna caught a bemused smile from Janeway as Seven collected herself.

"I will attend," the blonde assured him.

"Excellent. Fun commences at eighteen-hundred hours."

"Thank you, Neelix, for handling things with your usual efficiency," Janeway praised him. Drawing all eyes back to her, and off the discomfited Seven, she turned to B'Elanna. "Let's turn to department updates. Engineering?"

"Engines are running at ninety-seven percent efficiency though over Gamma shift we seem to have ruptured the conduit in junction 10-Beta. Seven and I started repairs, but Ayala is finishing

now."

Seven did not add her own commentary and B'Elanna took only a few minutes more to fully outline her department's status for the captain.

As the meeting progressed, Seven let her PADD and her eidetic memory track the various reports, and asides. She was content to let the larger portion of her concentration dwell on the prospect of a party for celebrating the day of her birth.

Seven had been to parties, thrown by the gregarious Talaxian Neelix, for other crewmembers' birthdays. She preferred the periphery at those events when she was unable to avoid attending at all, but knew that as 'the birthday girl', she would be required to be in the center of the crew's boisterousness.

She pinched off an exhalation. Naomi Wildman had apparently worked hard on the event. Seven considered herself Naomi's friend, as the girl considered her. She would attend.

"Seven?"

Seven looked up across the conference table at the sound of the captain's call only to realize that the room had emptied. The meeting had adjourned. How had she missed that?

"Are we getting a little too routine for you?" Captain Janeway prodded, though she was smiling lightly. Seven tried to decide how to respond.

Kathryn noted Seven's bewilderment with some surprise. The young woman was not often caught off-guard, or in this case, clearly day-dreaming. She wondered what had preoccupied Seven so adorably, her face soft, pensive, and unguarded by turns signs of anxiety, thoughtfulness and happiness crossing her features.

Seven started to her feet, but unable to pass up this private opportunity, Kathryn gently restrained her with a touch, and edged a hip onto the table surface. She returned her hands to the surface to quickly convey she was not upset with Seven.

Just concerned. "Are you all right, Seven?"

"I find myself trying to decide what it feels like...to be a year older. I feel no different than yesterday."

"But you've changed a lot since your last birthday."

"On my last celebrated birthday I was five years old and about to be assimilated by the Borg, Captain." The fact was given without rancor, but it was hard to hear for Janeway nonetheless.

She softened her voice, unaware how intimately she spoke, how she always sought to soothe with Seven. "I... meant just a year ago, but...is that what's bothering you? That the last birthday you remember is so far in your past?"

"Sometimes," Seven admitted. "It does not feel like it happened to me...but to someone else."

Kathryn considered that quietly for a moment. "I'd like to give you something...for your birthday, if you'll accept it?"

"You wish to give me a present? Now?"

"I thought about holding on to it until later... well, the party. Anyway...but, I...well, anyway..." She gave up trying to explain and reached under her conference chair. "I stashed it here when... well you have a tendency to come to my Ready Room...a lot." *And my quarters*, her inner voice added.

Seven's eyes studied the package, slight movements showing her gaze trailing over the lines, a curious crease in her forehead suggesting she was trying to divine its contents. Her expression was caught between delight and wariness, and Kathryn lifted her hands to cup them around the bulk.

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"Here," she prodded gently.

"I do not wish to alter custom." Seven nevertheless stroked the paper idly, looking from it to Janeway's face frequently. The child in her may have adored red, but the blue-silver... She looked up again into the captain's eyes. The swirl of blue-gray held her enthralled, in silence.

"After what you said, I think privacy is... will be better." Kathryn looked where their hands joined around the present and reluctantly withdrew hers. "For this, anyway. You can share your other gift with...anyone you like."

The furrow in Seven's forehead briefly deepened. "Another present?" Janeway nodded. "But I should open this here?"

"If you wish."

Seven carefully separated the wrapping at the points of contact adhesive. Lifting out the framed holo-image she immediately recognized the subjects. "It is a picture of my family."

"You can't drink wine. You don't have need of a tea set since you don't drink coffee. I... wanted to be sure you had a proper housewarming gift."

"Housewarming?"

Kathryn held out a small disc. "I thought you might like to move out of the cargo bay."

Seven tentatively touched the composite media then grasped it firmly, turning it over in her hand as the captain relinquished it. "It is a pass key," she identified.

"I know you could program anything to your entry with Borg encryptions. I... appreciate that you haven't in quite some time," Kathryn chuckled nervously, rewarded with a quirk of Seven's lips. "But you deserve privacy. That is to your new quarters...on deck 3." She paused, holding and releasing a breath. "If you want them."

Seven considered her response while turning the disc over in her fingers pensively. She had been thinking of requesting quarters and a uniform for some time. An assessing glance to the captain found the other woman patiently awaiting some sort of response. There was a tic in her cheek, a sign of nervousness. "Will the alcoves in the cargo bay be dismantled?"

"That's up to you. You may want to have one moved to your quarters, for privacy when you regenerate."

"Only you have ever disturbed a regeneration cycle," Seven revealed.

"Oh."

Seven looked back down at the disc. "Perhaps proximity will allow us to resume our... discussions?"

Janeway smiled, surprised and pleased by Seven's insightful query. "I'd like that."

"As would I." After a short pause she added, "Captain, thank you for the gifts."

"You're welcome." Seven finally stood, starting for the doorway, certain that their conversation was over. "Seven?"

Pleasure coursed through Seven as she stopped instantly and looked back. "Yes, Captain?"

"I'm -" Janeway shook her head briefly. "Never mind. I'll see you after duty. At your party."

"I will not be late," Seven assured her gravely.

As the doors closed behind Seven, Janeway murmured to herself, "Neither will I."

### Part Three

Passing through the bridge, Seven entered the turbolift. The doors enclosed her in privacy. She turned the entrycode disc over in her right hand, musing on the minute impressions that marked

it as her property. She was swamped again by feelings of lightheaded amazement.

The computer interrupted her. *"Please state your destination."*

"Deck 8, Astrometrics," she answered automatically then looked at the captain's other present, the holographic picture of her parents and herself. "Correction. Deck 3, aft section."

The picture would be safer during her shift stored in her quarters. Safe from questions by Icheb, or the bubbly nervous Tal Celes, both of whom would query her endlessly about people they didn't know in a picture they had never seen.

Standing in front of her doorway, Seven inserted the disc, entered a preferred access code, and stepped over the threshold. Privacy had been a completely unfamiliar concept to her such a short time ago. Now, as she looked around the dim emptiness, she accepted she had grown to want it. She had even begun assembling all the arguments to present to Commander Chakotay, who was in charge of quarters assignment. But the other thing she had practiced in that holodeck program made the thought of approaching him roil her stomach. So she had practiced asking the captain, and in practice the situation had gone rather well.

Now the captain managed to provide exactly what she required when she required it. The knowledge that the captain was not ignorant of her, in fact very aware of her, made Seven's skin warm with pleasure, and oddly her knees shook. She had to settle to the bed, the only sitting surface, and catch her breath. A narrow shelf alongside the bed, set in the wall, became home to her family's picture, and Seven found herself laying back against the mattress, hands crossed easily on her stomach, dazedly studying the faces, finding them swimming after a few moments, as tears collected in confusion. It was not sadness that filled her chest but an amazingly profound sense of belonging.

As she had told Janeway though, she had the most hopes of resuming their discussions. Late night, early morning, middle of a heated battle. It would not matter.

Seven remembered one of the very first times she had interrupted Janeway in her ready room. It had been following an encounter with a race that wanted to rewrite Lt. Torres's memory engrams, having accused the half-Klingon woman's violent thoughts of being responsible for a murder. Firm in her belief that the captain's methods would kill her, or her crew, before they could fulfill their primary goal of returning to their homes, Seven had dissected and dismissed those methods with incisive accusation.

Janeway had merely smiled and replied that she was pleased to hear Seven's point of view, but she disagreed. Their mission was to get home, but the Human mission was always one of discovery and exploration. Seven refused to agree, unable to accept the danger of such a perspective. Janeway finished with the notion that she would worry when everyone agreed with her.

They were always discussions in private making Seven feel elevated. When she had dared challenge Janeway in public the result was lessening, coarse. After only a handful of encounters that way, Seven, still determined to exchange views, kept them private, bringing herself to Janeway's quarters off-duty. The results were invigorating.

Janeway's first appearance at Seven's alcove in the cargo bay, a turnabout with the captain requesting her input, still held as one of Seven's most cherished memories. Janeway came when no one else would come near, during the most difficult time in Seven's life: the death of One. She sharply inhaled as the pain of the young male Borg came sharply even now. Even Icheb's presence could not make her forget the Borg that the Doctor had, on more than one occasion, referred to as their "child", due to the unusual circumstances of his existence, the mixing of her nanoprobe and the Doctor's mobile emitter.

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Following One's death, Seven had desperately craved the emptiness of the cargo bay. She had raged, tearing into the alcoves - representations of the Borg shadow that would, it seemed, never leave her life. Seven threw something - a spanner, she thought, at an ensign coming to retrieve supplies. Helplessness, and hopelessness, raw violent emotions she had thought herself distanced from her first days disconnected from the hive, swamped her again.

She kicked things, upset consoles, containers, and spun with a growl at another swish of the doors. But the growled, "Get out!" died before she could speak. Janeway said nothing. Her eyes though held as much sadness as Seven felt.

No words exchanged, but the two of them worked together to repair the cargo bay. When it was done, Janeway left Seven sitting on the dais, head in her hands. The tears came more gently then, cleansing, exhausting. Loathing getting into her alcove, Seven slept for the first time - against the hard deck.

From that connection, they began having conversations everywhere and anywhere, a level of camaraderie that made returning to the cargo bay more lonely each time.

Then Seven was kidnapped Captain Ransom, the Starfleet captain of the *USS Equinox*, whose crew, like Janeway's had been ripped into the Delta quadrant by the Caretaker's array. After the rescue however, Janeway never came to the cargo bay again. Seven's pursuit, desperately needing to talk about the renegade captain's methods, which she knew Janeway never approved, was met with excuses of being too busy, or too tired. She spent almost no time with the captain outside of duties... until, in her own desperation to have her answers one way or another, Seven tried to download the whole of *Voyager's* logs into her cortical array.

Janeway had pleaded, crouched on a shuttle deck, for Seven to trust her, to come home.

*Home*. She glanced at the far wall. With the captain right next door. She earnestly hoped the proximity would mean resuming their socialization activities. Velocity definitely. She would even indulge the captain's whim for da Vinci should the woman invite her, despite Seven's inability to find the Renaissance figure's presence as relaxing as the captain seemed to.

Exhaling to clear the disturbing train of thought, Seven rubbed her cheeks dry and rolled to her feet. It was time to report for duty.

\* \* \*

Tugging her tunic in line, Janeway pulled together her best 'captain' look and strode onto the bridge, though she still held a warmth in her chest from Seven's reaction to her gift. She said 'thank you', her giddy mind reminded her.

Seven never doled out compliments, and her only other 'thank you' had silenced Janeway so long the younger woman had already excused herself to report for duty by the time she had recovered.

Settling into her chair on the bridge, Janeway turned her eyes to the viewscreen, but was busy committing the last fifteen minutes to memory.

"Captain?"

Janeway turned to her first officer. "Yes, Chakotay?"

"You look a little... preoccupied," he suggested. "Everything all right?"

"Just fine."

"You, um, kept Seven a little long. Something wrong there?"

"No. No, she's fine."

"Good to hear." He looked over his shoulder toward the turbolift. "I wonder where she went, today's a bridge shift," said the man who set the schedules.

"Don't worry about it," Janeway assured him. "She's probably more comfortable in Astrometrics right now."

"We did sort of put her on the spot. I hope it means she won't skip out on her party." He quirked a smile. "I thought I'd claim a dance with the birthday girl."

"Dancing?" Brain imploding from the image of Seven dancing close, perhaps intimately with everyone but her, Janeway marveled that she managed that much.

"The Doctor taught her."

"I, um, can't really see that Naomi would plan a party with lots of dancing actually."

"It's absurd to have a six year old planning Seven's party." Chakotay shook his head. "She's no child."

"No, she's not," Janeway agreed, thoroughly sick to her stomach. Chakotay was beginning to definitely sound interested in Seven. "But Naomi is Seven's friend."

He leaned back in his chair and confirmed her every thought. "Captain, do you think Seven would be interested in dating?"

*God, a migraine was coming.* Colors burst before Janeway's eyes. She covered them with her hand and questioned weakly, "Why are you asking me?"

"You're her mentor, her mother, if you will. Do you think she's ready to date?"

*Since I suggested it myself a year ago, I should say yes,* her conscience pointed out. *Hell I will,* her heart denied.

"Captain?"

"I'm not her mother," Janeway said tightly. "Excuse me; I have reports to complete for Admiral Hayes." Stiffly she rose, leaving the bridge to Chakotay, and shut herself in her ready room.

In the small ensuite in the ready room, she splashed her face with cool water and sighed at her reflection in the mirror.

*Well, Katie, now you know you have competition.*

## **Part Four**

At precisely 1900 hours Seven of Nine entered *Voyager's* dining facility, colorfully dubbed the 'mess' hall. Not understanding a purpose to leaving early from her shift to change for the gathering, despite Icheb's words, she had not stopped by her new quarters to do so, still wearing her duty "uniform", a blue unitard with the gray shoulders.

Icheb however had excused himself before returning for her, changing from his usual brown top and pants. He wore a plaid green vest over a white cotton long sleeve shirt and pants made of a sturdy material he had identified as denim. He had called them 'jeans' when she inquired.

Naomi came hurrying to them from the kitchen area where Seven's sharp hearing caught the sounds of Neelix's preparations. "Seven, you're supposed to make an entrance."

Confused, Seven shook her head. "I did enter, precisely on time."

"Well no one else is here yet, so why don't you go change for the party?"

Again with the changing. Seven examined Naomi and noted the young girl's attire was also denim jeans, but with a red sleeveless pullover. "I assume that I am required to be attired similarly?"

"It's a theme party, Seven." Naomi turned to Icheb, putting her hands on her hips. Seven felt a

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smile tug at her lips as she noted the similarity with the captain's "dressing down" posture. Naomi charged Icheb, "I thought you told her."

The young male looked amazingly exasperated, and uncowed by Naomi's ire. He answered, his own hands spreading a little wide. "I tried."

So thoroughly albeit indirectly chastened since neither looked at her, Seven left Icheb to "finish things up" with Naomi, and walked down the deck 3 corridor toward her new quarters.

Janeway knew she was late. Not because she had dashed away from the bridge at the last possible moment. Instead, hoping to be among those who gathered in the dark and wish Seven a ringing chorus of 'Happy Birthday' the moment she entered, Janeway had given Chakotay command of the bridge and headed for her quarters half an hour early.

Secretly she hoped it flustered his plans a little, even as she stood stymied, in her undergarments, before her closet still deciding what to wear.

Naomi's invitation had specified that it was a theme party – Neelix was cooking hamburgers, hot dogs, and providing side dishes such as potato salad and corn on the cob for a "Western Roundup."

Kathryn smiled considering *Voyager's* youngest crewmember. Naomi had been embracing more Earth-related ideas in recent months, no doubt spurred a bit by the anxieties created by the space-born entity that had almost convinced them all that its gullet was a wormhole that led straight to it. Indeed if not for Seven's own reticence about Earth, they would have not escaped. After that incident, addressing her daughter's reticence, Samantha Wildman, who like Kathryn, had grown up in the American Midwest, encouraged her daughter to study both her father and her mother's home worlds.

Familiarity with the attire required however was not solving the captain's dressing dilemma. Finally, with a heaving sigh of exasperation she grabbed a pair of black jeans, smoothing the legs over her Starfleet-issue ebony boots. Over her uniform's gray tank top she pulled on a blue cambric shirt, tucking the tail into her pants without bothering to do the buttons.

In a hurry, she bolted out the door, turning toward the Mess Hall, colliding impressively with someone right in front of her threshold. The pair of them hit the deck in a noisy jumble of arms, legs and amazingly soft bodies. The unfortunate person's breath whooshed out of their chest as they hit the hard deck. Janeway landed akimbo on top.

Lurching upright, Janeway snapped the evidence of her senses together. She straddled narrow hips, long legs rubbing hers. And there were soft breasts under her palms. With a groan, she blurted, "Seven!" and sprang to her feet.

The tumbled blonde moved more gingerly to her feet. "Yes, Captain," she replied once she stood upright. She rubbed her head where it had impacted the deck, feeling the lump already beginning to form. She winced at the touch. "Ow."

"I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

"I do not know."

Janeway lifted Seven's chin, causing a cascade of sensations down from that point, deep into Seven's chest. The captain's gaze captured her attention. Seven's throat went dry. She swallowed as Janeway spoke, "How many of me do you see?"

"One."

"You'll be fine then." With a half-caress to Seven's cheek, Janeway stepped back. "Which way were you going?"

"To my quarters to change. Naomi insisted."

"Well, I'll..."

"Would you be willing to assist me?"

"Seven, I..."

"I have no idea what would be best."

Janeway watched Seven's eyes move over her attire and then Janeway's. Seven slightly pursed her full lips indicating she found herself at a loss. How she had gotten so good at reading the young woman's expressions, Janeway could only surmise, but it served her well now. "All right. Come on. It won't take long," she offered with a light smile.

"Thank you."

"We'll just consult your new replicator," she pointed out.

Seven nodded, keyed open her entrance, and gestured the captain in ahead of her. The doors slid together behind them, enclosing them in the silence, and solitude of the private space. She watched Janeway turn in place, smiling and nodding as she did so. "It's a little bare," the captain said.

"I have not decorated yet," Seven said simply.

"Will you?" Janeway walked back to her, head tilted up until their eyes met. Seven noted the smooth length of Janeway's throat and her fingers twitched. Startled by the involuntary action she jerked her eyes to Janeway's wondering if the woman had seen the motion.

"Yes," Seven managed though she was surprised to find her voice. "I have already placed your housewarming gift," she volunteered, gesturing toward the bed.

The captain looked away then, finding the picture in the wall niche. She shifted her eyes away from the bed as her chest grew warm. The replicator came into view. "Let's get you changed for the party," she brought the subject responsibly back on track.

"What do you suggest?"

"Neelix to the Captain." The captain's combadge beeped between them.

"Something fast," Janeway suggested with a lift of her eyebrow before tapping her badge.

"We're on our way, Mr. Neelix. Janeway out." Turning back to Seven, she inquired lightly, "Do you still favor red? Or do you prefer blue now?" she added, nodding at Seven's biosuit.

Seven thought of Naomi's red vest. But noted how fitting blue was on the captain and how she had chosen the colors for her most recent change in biometric suits, at the Doctor's suggestion to "seize some adventure" when she had grown weary of brown. "Either is suitable."

"Well, how about both?" Janeway programmed a pair of navy blue jeans for Seven, passing them over then looking away with the necessity of programming a top, while Seven began to strip.

It's certainly getting quite warm in here, isn't it? her subconscious poked. Janeway swallowed, pulling a red cotton tank top from the replicator. She remembered how delicious Seven had looked in red in the holodecksimulation. *Yes, it's definitely getting too hot in here.* She turned around, finding Seven gazing at her, quite nude, and quite oblivious to the effect she was having on Janeway. "Try this top," Janeway stuttered, firmly holding Seven's gaze, rather than dropping her eyes.

"Thank you." Seven's hands brushed hers as she took the garment. Janeway watched Seven pull it down along slender arms dusted with fine blonde hairs, over her head, smoothing it over implants adorning her chest and waist. Seven paused as she went to smooth sleeves that were not present and brushed an implant in her right arm with a grimace.

*So she's still sensitive about her visible implants,* Janeway surmised. Without a word, she turned back to the replicator and requested a three-quarter sleeve cotton cling top also red, recalling the style from another portion of Seven's holodeck creation, the baby shower.

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Seven's eyebrow lifted as she exchanged the garments, but Janeway could not tell if it was the unspoken acknowledgement of her discomfort, or familiarity of the style which caused the young woman's querulous. She said nothing, and exhaled in relief when the change was complete.

"Am I attired appropriately?" Seven asked.

"The outfit suits you," Janeway responded warmly. "I think you're ready."

"Thank you."

"Let's go." Janeway turned toward the door.

The two women matched strides, leaving the quarters, walking down the corridor, and entering the Mess Hall to the cheers of the gathered *Voyager* crew. Janeway tried to step aside before Seven was swarmed, but at a surprise touch on her arm, she stayed by the young woman's side.

She was Seven's unspoken escort through this most Human of rituals. Chakotay approached; Janeway quirked a smile. "All well on the bridge, Commander?" she asked blithely. He was still in uniform.

"Just fine." Janeway watched him turn his gaze, though not his body, away from her, studying Seven at length. He frowned after a moment, his eyes returning to Janeway. "Excuse me?"

"Certainly." She watched him turn and walk against the tide of people, to the table of food and drink, and pouring himself one that looked suspiciously "stiff."

The tide around Seven began to slow, Naomi encouraging Seven toward another table with a sheet cake. Janeway read with a smile aloud: "Happy Birthday, Seven Howdy, Pardner"

"What is a Pardner?"

Naomi smiled. "It's Western American dialect for people who share a common goal, like family."

"It's very appropriate, Naomi," Janeway assured. "It's lovely. Did you do the decorations yourself?" Aside from the lettering, there were icing decorations that suggested horses, cows and a farmhouse.

"She certainly did, Captain," Neelix interjected. "Wouldn't let me replicate it."

"Can we cut it now?"

"After the captain's toast, I think. Right, Captain?"

Janeway smiled. "Well then, I think I need a glass of punch. Seven too."

"Coming right up." Neelix backed out and returned with several bright blue plastic cups on a tray, each filled with a translucent blue liquid which looked, to Janeway, suspiciously like Romulan ale.

"Non-alcoholic, Neelix?"

"Of course," Neelix answered. Naomi lifted a cup and held it up. Other crewmembers did the same.

With cup in hand, Janeway turned to Seven. Their eyes met. The traditional toast she had offered at countless birthdays, year after year out here, wouldn't pass her lips. Silence reigned until she felt the press of curious eyes on them both. Everything that skittered through her mind seemed too trite, too simple for everything Seven's presence, on *Voyager*, in their lives, in her life, had come to mean. Finally she swallowed, wetting her suddenly dry mouth. "We all grow older, but may we never grow apart. Happy birthday."

*Whoa, how the hell do I explain that?* She searched Seven's face for her reaction, but Seven only nodded, saying nothing.

"Hear, hear" chorused around them, and Janeway backed up, going to find a seat, quietly out

of the way where her red face would be less noticeable.

## Part Five

With an expression Kathryn thought bordered on adorable, Seven listened intently as Naomi explained the rules of the current party game. The little girl waved a strip of brown fabric as she talked. Seven's lips pursed as the objective was outlined. Harry Kim objected.

"Hey! No fair. Seven doesn't get dizzy." Apparently realizing he was assuming something, he eyed the Borg askance. "Do you?"

Seven's left brow lifted slightly as she considered the question. "Having never been spun in place, I cannot answer that."

Harry chuckled, reaching for her shoulders. "Well, then let me show you."

"Blindfold her first," Naomi instructed.

Seven balked as Harry lifted another cloth strip near her head. "No."

Chakotay nodded. "I agree. Seven doesn't want to play a child's game." He held out his hand toward Seven. "Wouldn't you rather dance?"

Janeway's eyes moved from Chakotay to Seven, who looked uncertain then to Naomi, who looked upset. "Seven?" When the blonde's eyes raised to hers, Kathryn nodded at Naomi. "What do you want to do?"

"I would like to see how the game is played," Seven admitted. "I am intrigued by the deliberate blocking of one's senses." Harry smiled and lifted the blindfold again; Seven could not help her reaction though. She jerked away from his touch.

"Naomi," Janeway gambled, taking the cloth from Harry and holding it out to Naomi. "Why don't you put on Seven's blindfold?"

"I can't reach," the girl responded, leaving it Janeway's hands, literally and figuratively. "Captain?"

Janeway stepped up to Seven, her stomach twisting nervously. She laid her free hand on Seven's near shoulder. She knew what caused Seven's reluctance to be touched, and respected it, quietly giving the young woman the assurance, with her eyes as their gazes locked, with her touch, as their fingers slid over one another, and together they put on the blindfold. Janeway said nothing, stepping back, finding Seven's hand remaining linked with hers until she was distant enough that their grip had to part or look obvious.

Despite that, Kathryn was bereft when their touch broke. Seven's voice, sure and strong, asked for Naomi. "What do I do now?"

"I'll turn you around," Naomi responded, smiling at Janeway, who grinned back. "And then when I let you go, you have to find the statue and pin this -" she laid the other cloth strip, this one with a pin tucked through one end, on Seven's right palm, "where it goes."

As Seven turned in place with Naomi's guiding hands, she listened to the voices around her. No doubt a cacophony to the normal range of human senses, she was able to pick out each individual voice, and set their positions in her mind relative to one another.

B'Elanna Torres's cheers cast over a rumbly growl sounded next to Tom Paris's catcalls and claps. Harry, who had been close to her at the beginning, seemed to be moving around the crowd, first left then ahead then right. Seven could even hear Janeway's distinctive voice, as the woman moved away from the crowd entirely. Seven brow furrowed, recognizing a curiosity as to why the captain would leave the party. Then she heard the tumble of ice in a glass, liquid pouring over it, and

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recognized Chakotay's undertone and Janeway's quiet replies.

"I won't stop this. She is having fun."

"A child's fun," the first officer retorted. "She's a grown woman."

"Who lost her childhood," Janeway replied, and the captain's unmistakable footfalls returned to the ring of onlookers surrounding Seven.

Naomi's hands left her arm. The noises ceased, and people seemed to be collectively holding their breath.

Seven did surprisingly feel disoriented, but not because of any imbalance in the fluids in her inner ear, a condition that ordinary humans would have suffered after such an ordeal. Should she continue this game or insist on adult rituals? "Naomi?"

"Yes, Seven?" The girl's hand was back in her own, and even blindfolded, Seven could picture the pixie-like face turned upward framed in curiosity.

The interaction made her decision simple. "I am to find the horse's rear end now?"

Naomi giggled. "Yeah. Ready?"

Seven nodded. "Ready." She released Naomi's hand and stepped confidently forward. Then another, and one more brought her up against the statue. She smiled and with calculated intent, did not methodically find the rear from the head where she knew she stood, pressing the tail into position on the statue's flank.

Naomi's laughter was musical; Janeway joined the girl, and Seven pulled off the blindfold to turn around and look at the two females sharing pleased smiles. Behind them, Chakotay looked as if he had consumed something very sour. Seven ignored him, walking to Naomi, and lifting her chin. "Thank you for the fun party."

The girl beamed. Seven and the Captain's hands rested, one on each shoulder turning to Neelix. "Present time, Neelix," the girl announced.

"Coming right up," the cheery-voiced Talaxian nodded vigorously and stepped over to his cooking counter, bending over and retrieving something from a lower cabinet.

"Seven," Naomi prefaced her gift. "I've always been glad you're my friend."

"So have I," Seven replied.

"And how much you have helped me to become the captain's assistant." Here the girl looked to Janeway.

Seven glanced up briefly as well. "It's an admirable goal to assist the captain."

"Even though there is no formal post," Naomi admitted with a grin. Janeway smiled and squeezed Naomi's shoulder. "Anyway, Seven, I just wanted to give you something to say 'thanks'."

Neelix approached with a very small gaily wrapped box, holding it out to Seven, who released Naomi's shoulder to take it. She split the paper with a nail and opened the box within. A single, hollow circlet rank insignia lay on the cushioning. She raised a puzzled expression to Janeway and Naomi. The little girl's answer was to remove something from her own pocket and give it to the captain, who affixed the matching pip, a cadet circlet, to the girl's red vest collar. "You both earned it. For duty to me, and to this ship," the captain said with a smile. "Naomi pointed it out to me," she said not quite truthfully. True the girl had mentioned it when Janeway called her into her Ready Room to make the official appointment. Janeway had been thinking about Seven's holodeck program already. "You'll find your replicator now produces a uniform - if you'd like to wear it."

"Her replicator?" asked Harry.

"Yes. The captain's present on this occasion was quarters," Seven informed him succinctly.

"Cool," the ensign recovered. "So when's the housewarming?"

Seven shook her head. "I have not decided."

Naomi looked at Seven, the simpler garment bereft of a collar. "Where are you going to pin your pip, Seven?"

"On my uniform when I report for duty in the morning," Seven reasoned. "It is also very late. I believe it is appropriate to call an end to the party."

Naomi made a face then smiled at Seven. "Did you have fun?"

Seven looked at all the faces around her, filled with smiles and genuine pleasure, then Chakotay's seeming perpetual frown and she remembered her conversation with the captain in her quarters. "My last birthday party could not compare," she replied to Naomi, eyes on Janeway.

To her surprise, the captain blushed. Seven however had no time to contemplate that as Naomi's hug distracted her gaze.

"I'm really glad," Naomi gushed. The crowd's applause filled their ears.

"All right," Neelix conceded. "Party's over."

Seven received several pats on the back and a thumbs-up from B'Elanna as the pregnant woman slipped out with Tom as the crew dispersed. She was soon standing in the middle of the mess hall, as Neelix began cleaning up around her, gazing at the now mangled message on her cake.

"Are you going to take that with you?" he asked her.

"No, it was enjoyable, but I could not consume its remains on my own."

"All right, then." He wrapped it up and bore it away, tucking it into the refrigeration unit at the back of the cooking area.

Seven turned away and finally noticed the captain had also remained behind. The woman's back was to the room, hands crossed in front of her as she stood next to a table, looking at the stars streaking outside *Voyager's* warp field. She had come to the party out of uniform, and Seven decided the casual appearance was extremely appealing.

"Captain?"

Janeway's hands uncrossed and she turned abruptly. "Oh, Seven, I thought you had gone."

Seven studied the pip in her hand. "I was surprised by this," she said quietly, not quite certain why but knowing she wanted their exchange not overheard by Neelix.

"You are part of this crew," Janeway pointed out. "An important part."

"Why did you blush?"

Janeway blinked. "What?"

"When I looked to you after thanking Naomi, why did you blush?"

"I..." Janeway shrugged. She considered dissembling, but Seven's gaze was once again as direct as before and she could feel the blush creeping up her neck. It would soon be obvious in her cheeks once more. "I think I should be going."

"I will walk with you to our quarters," Seven said easily, moving into matching Janeway's steps even as the captain turned away. She detected the warmth in the captain's neck rising quickly to her cheeks and something told her that the captain was about to object. "I find I need to speak with you about Commander Chakotay," she interjected before anything could be said.

"Chakotay?"

"I was uncomfortable with his words," Seven admitted. "Normally he ignores me. Now he seems to find everything to criticize or comment. He found the party unimportant."

"It should be more important what you think of the party." Janeway asked, "You did enjoy yourself, right?"

"I did not lie to Naomi."

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"I'm glad. You used to disdain fun saying you were Borg. I know you can't recapture your childhood, but I'm glad you allow yourself to enjoy time with Naomi."

"She is a remarkable child."

"I know. I've spent time with her myself."

"I did not know that."

Janeway paused at her doorway's threshold with a sheepish look back over her shoulder. "Flotter's an old friend," she admitted.

"I did not have any old friends," Seven replied. "But I am appreciating my new friends."

Janeway nodded and swallowed under the sky blue direct gaze. "Would you like to have dinner tomorrow evening?"

"I would like that." Seven smiled, a supernova of brilliance in the dim light of the corridor. Janeway was glad Seven turned away so she could not see how she breathlessly unsettled her captain. Kathryn lingered in her doorway as Seven traveled the rest of the distance to her own door.

Janeway started to her doorway. Seven stepped into the sensor, keeping the door open.

"Captain..." She observed the line of Janeway's back stiffened slightly. "Kathryn," she tried uneasily.

"You've never called me by name," came the quiet reply.

"I have never been your 'neighbor' before. Perhaps now that has been established, we can spend more time where you are not my captain."

"Do you want that?" Janeway turned, surprising herself with her reticence now that it seemed Seven was reaching out to her in the way she had only imagined, but she forbid the hope to enter her suddenly pounding heart. "Annika?"

"I don't know that I ever can be that girl whom I was before my assimilation. However, you have brought me closer to that personality than anyone else. If you permit me to break the barrier and call you 'Kathryn', you may call me 'Annika'," Seven concluded.

"Have we truly a barrier between us?" Janeway asked.

"You established it yourself: 'I'm your captain; that means I can't always be your friend'," Seven quoted Janeway's words from Arturis's brig. "Today I feel you have wanted to change that." She pointed out all the moments alone together that day. "The conference room, presenting my new quarters, helping me find proper attire." She nodded. "The toast." Janeway's blush returned. "I know that it was not your usual toast."

"You're not the usual crewmember," Janeway replied quickly. "Especially to me."

"So," Seven asked. "Does this mean you will end the barrier between us?"

"I can't." Seven recognized the resignation in the gradual drop of her captain's shoulders.

Seven looked at Janeway's back. "And if I break it?" Seven stepped forward, grasped the woman's shoulder, lifted Janeway's chin and pressed her lips together with the captain's.

The sensations were explosive, nerve endings in her lips, hands and stomach all reporting overload. As if the kiss, something she had only practiced in virtual realities and holodeck simulations, had not already shattered the barrier between them, Seven lifted her mouth from Janeway's reveling in the other woman's rapid breathing against her throat, and murmured, "Kathryn."

"Seven?" Kathryn whispered, still afraid to believe that she was gripped in the embrace she had desired all day, all year...All her life.

"I know that both you and Commander Chakotay were both in my program," Seven revealed. "It is why he has begun paying attention to me. Unfortunately."

"And me?"

"Discovering that you had been in my program, I was at first ashamed that I had lied to you then relieved that I would not have to find words to explain. I cannot explain the experiment in truth. I was very confused after Unimatrix Zero, Axum, myself... I told you I was called 'Annika' there, but I still didn't understand who that person had been."

"So you tried to figure it out. And Chakotay?" Janeway asked.

"A choice based on the Doctor's lessons. It was confusing because I felt none of the things that I had read. Our interactions were insufficient. I did not feel love." Seven smiled then, brilliantly. "However when you presented me with the quarters, when you entered my quarters, I did feel the things I had read. I do feel them now. I have learned love is not an objective; it cannot be obtained by a single series of calculated events. It is a state of being. It accents interaction; it is not the interactions alone. You are Love. To me." Seven lowered her mouth to Kathryn's again, a sigh escaping from both of them through the deepening caress of their lips.

Across the corridor another door opened, drawing Seven and Janeway's attention. Chakotay stood before the threshold of his quarters, a very disturbed look on his face. All three shared varying expressions; Janeway's cheeks pinking slightly, Seven setting her jaw; Chakotay pursing his lips.

However, he said nothing, shook his head and disappeared into his private sanctum.

"He was expecting a different outcome," Janeway said. "Perhaps we need to talk to him."

"We require privacy not company," Seven said with conviction. She wrapped her arms around the captain's body, lifting her slightly and moving inside the captain's quarters so that the doors enclosed them in the private chamber.

**THE END**